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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: POPE CONDEMNS IRAQ CHURCH BOMBINGS; CHALDEAN CATHOLICS "DIDN'T SEE IT COMING"

1. (U) The Pope reacted strongly to Sunday's Iraq church bombings in an August 2 message to Emmanuel III, Patriarch of Iraq's Chaldean Catholic Church. The Pope said that he "firmly deplored the unjust aggressions against those whose only aim is to collaborate for peace and reconciliation in the country." He added that he felt close to Iraqi Catholics in their hour of suffering, which the statement said was made even more grave because the attacks took place while the faithful were gathered for prayer. The Pope expressed his hope that "all believers in one merciful God (would) unite in deploring every form of violence."

2. (SBU) Monsignor Philip Najim, representative of the Chaldean Church to the Holy See, told us August 2 that the Chaldeans "didn't see (Sunday's violence) coming." Though Najim and others had warned recently of increased animosity towards Christians on the part of Muslims (septel), Najim said few thought it would erupt into the wholesale attacks seen Sunday. "These are definitely not Iraqis," Najim insisted. "We have never had these problems in Iraq before."

3. (SBU) Najim said that one of the targets was the Patriarchal Seminary located next to a Chaldean parish. The parish was hosting a prayer service in preparation for the Catholic Feast of the Assumption August 15, so the victim toll was high. Najim said he had spoken to some monks attached to the seminary, who said they thought the death toll would be higher than media estimates. Najim had not yet been able to reach the Patriarch by phone, and was about to visit the Vatican to consult with officials there.

4. (SBU) Chaldean Catholics form the majority of Iraq's Christian population, some 750,000 people or 3 percent of the population. Well over 65,000 Chaldean Catholics live in the U.S., organized through a diocese headquartered in Detroit. Najim noted that the Chaldean Church, which suffered massacres of some 70,000 during World War I, was called "The Church of the Martyrs." He was shaken after the bombings, and worried that the attacks would spur a further exodus of Christians from Iraq.

NICHOLSON

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